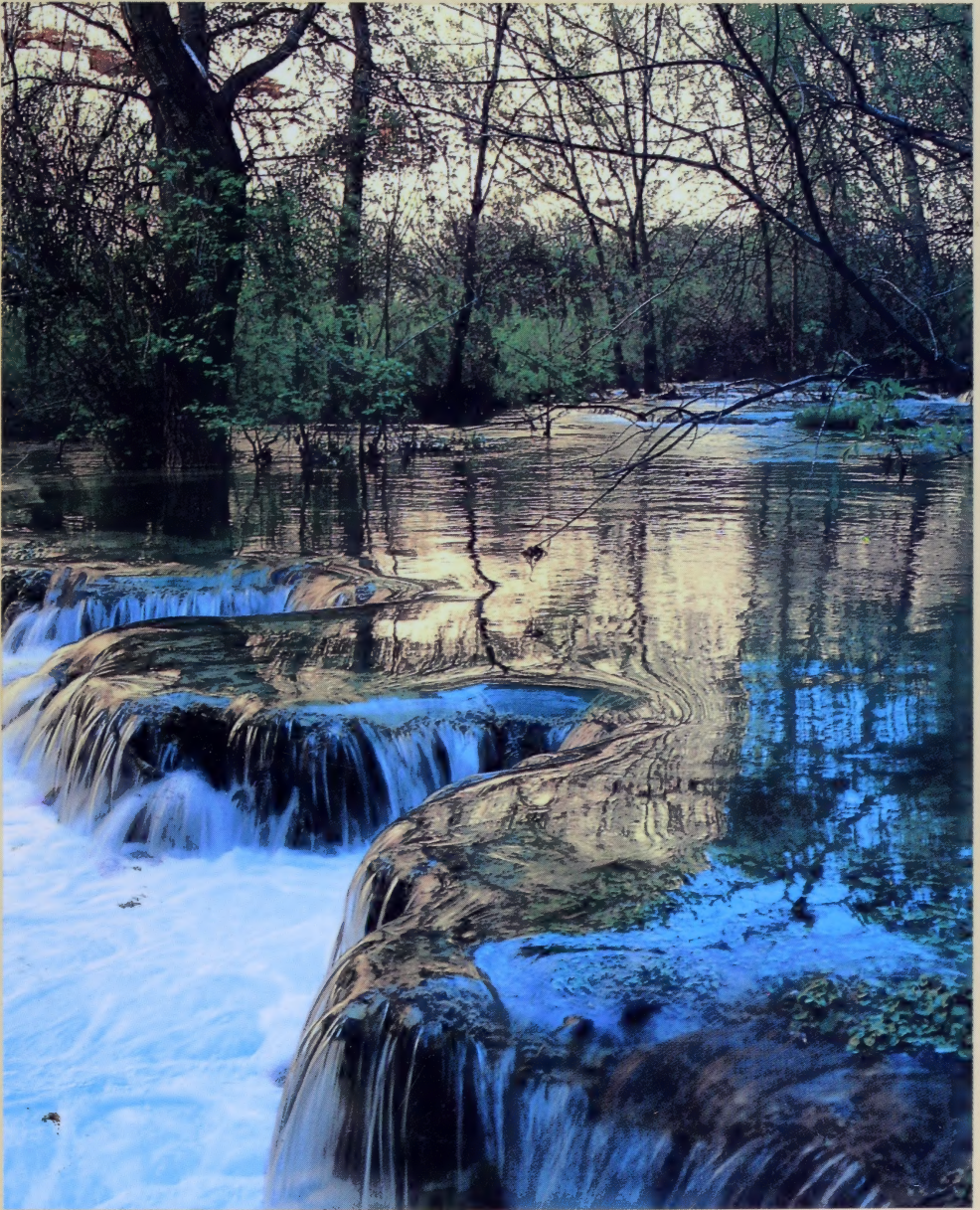


The DREAM of the EARTH

THOMAS BERRY



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The Hudson River Valley: A Bioregional Story

Tell me a story. How often we said that as children. Tell me a story. Story illumined the world for us in childhood. Even now we might make the request: tell me a story. Tell me the story of the river and the valley and the streams and woodlands and wetlands, of the shellfish and finfish. Tell me a story. A story of where we are and how we got here and the characters and roles that we play. Tell me a story, a story that will be my story as well as the story of everyone and everything about me, the story that brings us together in a valley community, a story that brings together the human community with every living being in the valley, a story that brings us together under the arc of the great blue sky in the day and the starry heavens at night, a story that will drench us with rain and dry us in the wind, a story told by humans to one another

that will also be the story that the wood thrush sings in the thicket, the story that the river recites in its downward journey, the story that Storm King Mountain images forth in the fullness of its grandeur.

It's a long story, a story that begins with the fracture across the eastern borders of the North American continent resulting from the clashing and rifting of tectonic plates, and it includes the molten intrusion whereby the Palisades emerged to terminate in those massive cracked columns to the west. The story of the great hydrological cycle that has drawn up from the Gulf and across from the Pacific and down from the Arctic and in from the Atlantic entire oceans of water and has poured them down in unending sequence over this region to give to the valley its shape, its fertility, and made of it a meeting place as the northern extreme of southern lifeforms and the southern extreme of northern lifeforms.

The story of the valley is the story of the glaciation that came down from the frigid north as recently as fifty thousand years ago to cover this area with ice more than a thousand feet in height, driving southward the multitude of living beings for some thousands of years and then returning northward some fifteen thousand years ago, leaving this region to take on its present shape and luxuriance of life, its trees and grasses and flowers, its singing birds and ambling bears, its red foxes, pheasants, wild turkeys, and bobolinks.

The story of the valley is also the story of the Indians who originally dwelled in this region. Even now, in the names of the area, we recognize the ghosts of the indigenous peoples: the Mahicans, the Wappinger, the Hackensack and the Raritan, the Kitawonks, the Tappans across the river, the Sinsinks of the Ossining area. These names of earlier tribes carry a mysterious abiding quality. As Chief Seattle once said of us and our cities: "When the last Red Man shall have perished, and the memory of my tribe shall have become a myth among the White Men, these shores will swarm with the invisible dead of my tribe, and when your children's children think themselves alone in the field, the store, the shop, upon the highway, or in the silence of the pathless woods, they

will not be alone.” Chief Seattle then continues with a profound insight into the enduring trauma being shaped in the psychic depths of the white man: “At night, when the streets of your cities and villages are silent and you think them deserted, they will throng with the returning hosts that once filled them and still love this beautiful land. The White Man will never be alone.”

These voices are there in the wind, in the unconscious depths of our minds. These voices are there not primarily to indict us for our cruelties, but to identify the distortions in our relations with the land and its inhabitants, and also to guide us toward a mutually enhancing human-earth relationship in this beautiful valley.

The valley was at the height of its grandeur when one day the mainmast of a strange sailing vessel broke over the horizon. The sails unfurled to their full expanse as the *Half Moon* came into full view and sailed across the bar at Sandy Hook and on through the Narrows into the channel and eventually up into the valley, past this region, to the shores of Albany.

Never was the region more brilliant in its color, in the exuberance of its life expression, in the grandeur of its tall white pines, in its beaver population, in the abundance of its oysters and clams, in its shad and tomcod and striped bass. Never were the woodlands more resonant with their songbirds, never were the skies more often witness to the peregrine falcon, the red-tailed hawks, and the bald eagles. Nor was the water ever more refreshing as it came down from the Adirondacks to meet the sea water around what later became Poughkeepsie.

We need to recall all this as we tell the story of the valley, for the valley required heavenly as well as earthly forces to bring it into being. It was a poignant moment then, when the sails from the east appeared over the horizon, for never again would the region have quite the mysterious brooding of the natural world in its pre-European phase, or that special mode of human presence to the natural world as was given by the indigenous peoples of this continent. When the sails appeared, the entire continent might have shuddered.

In 1907 there were numerous celebrations throughout the valley commemorating the arrival of our European ancestors in this region. Our settlements, our cultural and industrial achievements, were seen as high moments in the story of the valley. As we look back on these celebrations now, they appear to have had a certain naiveté, an exaggerated pride, even a certain arrogance, witnessing to our human tendencies toward self-glorification, oblivious of the larger consequences of our actions. These earlier celebrations honored the human at the expense of every other living being in the valley.

The distinguishing aspect of our more recent celebrations is that we now honor this region in and for itself, while trying to discover how our human presence to the region can be an enhancement rather than a diminishment. In this sense our celebrations are the opposite of those earlier celebrations. We have looked back over the centuries since the first European vessel sailed into the river and found that while they have been a period of glory and conquest for ourselves, what have they been from the standpoint of the valley in its natural forms.

What did it mean to the beaver that soon became extinct in much of the region? What did it mean to the millions of hemlock that were cut down simply for their bark for tanning hides? What did it mean for the great oyster beds and for the other shellfish that thrived so abundantly in the river? What did it mean to the organisms in the soil that later suffered from abusive agriculture? What did it forebode for the river that would receive the toxic runoff of chemical agriculture? What did it mean for the wetlands along the river that were filled in for trash heaps or to make way for railroads and highways? What did it mean for the river life when a nuclear generating station was set up at Indian Point? So we might ask ourselves those questions concerning the valley and the meaning of that moment when the mainmast of the *Half Moon* appeared above the Atlantic horizon.

As it came through the gap between Sandy Hook and the Rockaway Peninsula, through the Narrows into the upper bay, then into

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the river, the native peoples watching could have known nothing of their future or of the thoughts or intentions of the men in the great vessel. Nor could the men on the *Half Moon* have known fully their own minds nor the larger intentions of their political regimes nor the cultural ideals or economic forces that had brought them. Obscure forces were at work, driving an awesome transformation of this planet, ambivalent forces capable of both benign and deleterious consequences, forces with demonic intensity, forces ready to tear the North American continent to pieces in a stupendous effort to transcend the human condition in some serene millennial fulfillment.

We have all experienced these forces. A kind of possession seized us, and every being on this planet has felt its impact on a scale somewhat like those great geological upheavals or like the descent of a glacier. The valley and ourselves are both somewhat shattered. And yet the enormous creative forces deep in the reality of things are asserting themselves. Gratefully the valley before us has not been ruined so extensively as those valleys where a long sequence of dams has been built or where toxic wastes have completely ruined the aquatic life or where the water has been drained off into the fields for irrigation projects. We think of the Tennessee Valley, the Ohio, the Colorado, and the irreparable damage done to those and so many other regions over the years.

The Hudson River has not been dammed below the region of Troy. The abundant rainfall is sufficient for agricultural production. The river has, so far, been saved from exploitation of its fresh water because of the abundant water available from the Delaware Basin.

Even if the valley is more resilient than many other valleys of the North American continent and even if it has been saved from the devastation they have experienced, the river, the woodlands, and the soil have become seriously deteriorated over these past centuries, especially in this century, when the valley has been saturated with petrochemical residues in its air, its water and its

soil. Every living species in the valley has experienced the deleterious influence of our human presence. Even now the increased occupation of the land for shopping malls, parking lots, roadways, corporate headquarters, industrial sites, and development projects is progressively eliminating habitat needed by various bird and animal as well as insect and plant species. Even now our chemical agriculture is damaging the soil and poisoning the streams; industrial waste products and city sewage are pouring through the valley. Realizing all this, we must ask what has happened?

It would appear that we could not possibly have done all this or presently be doing this, for we see now that it is all self-destructive. We must have been in a trance state—caught up in our illusory world of wires and wheels and concrete and steel and roadways—where we race back and forth in unending frenzy.

The world of life, of spontaneity, the world of dawn and sunset and starlight, the world of soil and sunshine, of meadow and woodland, of hickory and oak and maple and hemlock and pineland forests, of wildlife dwelling around us, of the river and its well-being—all of this some of us are discovering for the first time as the integral community in which we live. Here we experience the reality and the values that evoke in us our deepest moments of reflection, our revelatory experience of the ultimate mystery of things. Here, in this intimate presence to the valley in all its vitality, we receive those larger intuitions that lead us to dance and sing, intuitions that activate our imaginative powers in their most creative functions. This, too, is what inspires our weddings, our home life, and our joy in our children. Even our deepest human sensitivities emerge from our region, our place, our specific habitat, for the earth does not give itself to us in a global sameness. It gives itself to us in arctic and tropical regions, in seashore and desert, in prairielands and woodlands, in mountains and valleys. Out of each a unique shaping of life takes place, a community, an integral community of all the geological as well as the biological and the human

components. Each region is a single community so intimately related that any benefit or any injury is immediately experienced throughout the entire community.

So it is also with ourselves. We who live here in the Hudson River Valley constitute a single organic community with the river and the lowlands and the surrounding hills, with the sunlight and the rain, with the grasses and the trees and all the living creatures about us. We are all in some manner needed by one another. We may disdain the insects and the lowly plankton in the river, we may resent the heat of summer or the ice of winter, we may try to impose our mechanistic patterns on the biological rhythms of the region, but as soon as any one of these natural functions is disturbed in its proper expression, we are in trouble, and there is no further support to which we can appeal.

The natural world has produced its present variety, its abundance, and the creative interaction of all its components through billions of experiments. To shatter all this in the belief that we can gain by thwarting nature in its basic spontaneities is a brash and foolish thing, as is amply demonstrated by many of our past activities. If we do not alter our attitude and our activities, our children and grandchildren will live not only amid the ruins of the industrial world, but also amid the ruins of the natural world itself. That this will not happen, that the valley will be healed where it is damaged, preserved in its present integrity and renewed in its creative possibilities, is the hope that is before us.

Just now we are, as it were, returning to the valley, finding our place once again after a long period of alienation. At such a moment in our own history, as well as in the history of the region, we need first of all an extreme sensitivity to the needs of all the various components of the valley community—the needs of the river, the soil, the air; the needs of the various living forms that inhabit the valley; and the special needs of the human community dwelling here in the valley. We need to know how these relate

to one another. Prior to our coming from abroad, all of these components of the region had worked out a mutually enhancing relationship. The valley was flourishing.

When we arrived we brought with us an attitude that the region was here for our exploitation. Even though we broke our treaties with the Indian tribes, we did recognize their rights and made treaties with them. It never entered our minds that we should also have made treaties with the river and with the land and with the region as a whole. In this we failed to do what even God did after the flood: "I set my rainbow in the cloud and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant which is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh."

Such a treaty, or some such spiritual bond, between ourselves and the natural world, is needed, a bonding based on the principle of mutual enhancement. The river and its valley are neither our enemy to be conquered, nor our servant to be controlled, nor our mistress to be seduced. The river is a pervasive presence beyond all these. It is the ultimate psychic as well as the physical context out of which we emerge into being and by which we are nourished, guided, healed, and fulfilled. As the gulls soaring above the river in its estuary region, as the blossoms along its banks, the fish within its waters, so, too, the river is a celebration of existence, of life lived in intimate association with the sky, the winds from every direction, the sunlight. The river is the binding presence throughout the valley community. We do not live primarily in Poughkeepsie or Peekskill, Newburgh or Yonkers. We live primarily along the river or in the valley. We are river people and valley people. That fact determines more than anything else the way we live, the foods we eat, the clothes we wear, how we travel. It also provides the content and context for celebrating life in its most sublime meaning.

We celebrate the valley not in some generalized planetary con-

text, but in the specific setting that we have indicated. It is a celebration of our place, but our place as story, for we need only look about us to appreciate the grandeur of these surroundings. The grandeur of the valley is expressed most fully in its story.

The story, as we have seen, is a poignant one, a story with its glory, but not without its tragedy. Now the story begins to express the greatest change in the valley since the modern story of the valley began in 1609. This is the moment of change from a sense of the valley as subservient to human exploitation to a sense of the valley as an integral natural community which is itself the basic reality and the basic value, and of the human as having its true glory as a functioning member, rather than as a conquering invader, of this community. Our role is to be the instrument whereby the valley celebrates itself. The valley is both the object and the subject of the celebration. It is our high privilege to articulate this celebration in the stories we tell and in the songs we sing.